



NOT WRITING ABOUT WAR

Prof. Kate McLoughlin

University of Oxford

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ABSTRACT

How can one write about war? How can one convey the appalling facts of mass loss, displacement, violence and trauma? How can one overcome the logistical difficulties, the problems of censorship and self-censorship, the premium placed on first-hand experience that automatically down-grades the writings of those who weren't there, the psychological inhibitions, the lack of attentive listeners?

This webinar will discuss why war *can't* be written about and, simultaneously, why it *must* be written about. We will explore the phenomenon of *not* writing about war: writing about the peripheries of war that allows war to be seen in relief. We will trace this phenomenon in three poems about different wars from different centuries: Charles Wolfe's 'The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna' (1816), Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' (1917) and, finally, Batool Abu Akleen's '39kg. ... I want a grave' (2025). The first of these relates to the Peninsular War, fought on the Iberian Peninsula between the Spanish, Portuguese and British on the one side and the First French Empire on the other. The second relates to the First World War. The last relates to the war in Gaza, seen by many still to be in process.

In the course of the seminar, we will consider whether *not* writing about something is actually more effective than addressing it directly and think about the ethics involved in the graphic representation of armed conflict.

About the speaker:

Kate McLoughlin is a Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford. She has published widely on war writing, including, as author, *Martha Gellhorn: The War Writer in the Field and in the Text* (2007), *Authoring War: The Literary*

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Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq (2011) and *Veteran Poetics: British Literature in the Age of Mass Warfare, 1790 – 2015* (2018); as editor, *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (2009); and, as co-editor, *Writing War, Writing Lives* (2017) and *The First World War: Literature, Culture, Modernity* (2018). Her next book, out in March 2026, is *Silence: A Literary History*. Kate visits Italy regularly. She has close friends and a godson in Brescia *e parla italiano, se non fluentemente, almeno con entusiasmo*.

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